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AUTHOR Bullion-Mears, Ann
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ABSTRACT

An action research study examined a teacher's developing collaborative practices in her secondary curriculum development and instructional methods class. The class was composed of 14 women ranging in age from 21 to approximately 50 in a medium sized southwestern university. Data were collected through a reflective journal and from certain student generated artifacts: walking journals, a mid-course evaluation, and the final required university course evaluation. Data analysis revealed two themes: the evolution of student voice and the redefinition of teacher voice. Data representing instances of student voice were sought when students were given opportunities to collaborate with each other or the teacher in the decision making process. Students were also given opportunities to engage in self and peer evaluation and final grades were negotiated with the instructor at an end-of-term conference. The reflective journal itself was important in helping the teacher to articulate her voice as a teacher. She had the greatest difficulty in achieving balance and control, determining if and when to intervene. Final reflection delineated the need for the instructor to scaffold students as they develop new collaborative learning patterns. (Author/RS)

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DEVELOPING COLLABORATION AND TEACHER REFLECTION IN A COLLEGE CURRICULUM CLASS

by

Ann Bullion-Mears

Texas Woman's University

CS214255

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ABSTRACT

Teachers rarely have the luxury of making overt, conscious reflection the cornerstone of their evolving philosophy or practice. I undertook this action research study of developing collaborative practices in my secondary curriculum development and instructional methods class because I was aware that a major, but unarticulated, change had occurred in my teaching philosophy. The study was conducted during the Spring, 1993 semester in a medium size southwestern university. The class was composed of 14 women ranging in age from 21 to approximately 50. I chose to collect my data through a reflective journal and from certain student generated artifacts: Walking Journals, a mid-course evaluation, and the final required University course evaluation.

Data analysis revealed two themes: the evolution of student voice and the redefinition of teacher voice. When examining the data for instances of student voice, I looked for times when the students were given opportunities to collaborate with each other or the teacher in the decision making process. Students were also given opportunities to engage in self and peer evaluation and final grades were negotiated with the instructor at an end of term conference. The reflective journal itself was a large force in helping me to articulate my voice as teacher. I looked for instances where my practice was consonant with my emerging philosophy. I had the greatest difficulty in achieving balance and control, determining if and when to intervene. Final reflection delineated the need for the instructor to scaffold students as they develop new collaborative learning patterns.

DEVELOPING COLLABORATION AND TEACHER REFLECTION IN A COLLEGE CURRICULUM CLASS

Folk wisdom holds that an effective teacher reflects on what occurs in his/her classroom. Teacher reflection can center on curricular decisions, interpersonal relationships, evaluation issues, or personal philosophy. Often reflection occurs as the teacher rushes from one assignment to the next, and frequently, creative ideas for change and/or improvement are lost. Teachers seldom employ reflection as the cornerstone of their developing philosophy or practice.

This study of the expanding application of collaborative techniques in a college curriculum class began in response to a growing awareness of a major, unarticulated shift in the researcher's teaching philosophy. This shift and her beliefs in the creation of a collaborative learning community required thoughtful examination. The research questions were: 1) How has the researcher's educational philosophy changed over time and how is that shift depicted in a particular class setting? 2) Are collaborative practices being implemented and if so, to what extent? 3) How do students and teacher respond to an evolving process of classroom change?

Perspectives on Collaboration and Reflection

Judith Newman's Interwoven Conversations (1991) demonstrates the use of teacher reflection in a collaborative classroom. According to Newman, collaborative teachers coach students and

become learners with their students. Curriculum negotiation emerges as Newman's major determinant of the collaborative model. Bruffee (1973) concurs that teachers must rethink their role, moving to the perimeter of the action and becoming organizers of a learning community. In addition to role redefinition, the teacher must be "wary of his own tendency to lapse back into the traditional patterns of dominance and passivity" (Bruffee, 1973, p. 642). As Smith (1988) points out, "Schools do not facilitate collaboration; they are not places where mutual enterprises are easily undertaken" (p. 68). While his collaborative criteria include no grades, no restrictions, no coercion, and no status, Smith's determinant factor is trust, trust in oneself as well as trust in others. Trimbur (1989) views collaborative learning as consensus building. Not consensus based on collective agreement which can silence or constrain students, but consensus based on explanations of how people differ, where those differences come from, and how those differences can be tolerated.

According to Schön (1983), reflection focuses "interactively on the outcomes of action, the action itself, and the intuitive knowing implicit in the action" (p. 56). Reflection-on-action occurs after the fact. Reflection-in-action refers to minute by minute decisions, bounded by that zone of time "in which action can still make a difference to the situation" (Schön, 1983, p. 62). Schön believes teachers become reflective practitioners when they listen to students and entertain ideas that transcend the

lesson plan. Interwoven with reflection is reflexivity, "consciousness about being conscious; thinking about thinking" (Myerhoff & Ruby, 1982, p.1). Reflexivity does not occur unless the practitioner detaches from the process and turns back to look upon the self. It "loosens us from habit and custom and turns us back to contemplate ourselves just as we may be beginning to realize that we have no clear idea of what we are doing" (Myerhoff & Ruby, 1982, p. 1). Newman (1990) adds the notion of critical incidents, "those occurrences that let us see with new eyes" (p. 17). Critical incidents make educators aware of beliefs and assumptions underlying practice and of gaps between what is said and what is done. Recording and examining these incidents develops awareness of instructional decisions that interfere with student learning.

Methodology

This study utilized ethnographic techniques to collect data. The researcher was a participant observer in the classroom and recorded her observations in a reflective journal. Journal entries written following each class described and interpreted what had occurred. Data were collected from files to reconstruct the researcher's historic involvement with the course. Student data included Walking Journals, a midterm course evaluation, and a final course evaluation. Walking Journals travelled from student to student within a group of four. Students were encouraged to write about the course, the field experience, the readings, or

other relevant topics and to respond to each other, asking specific questions and making specific comments. Every fifth class the journals were given to me, and I commented on group interaction and individual entries. At midterm, the course was evaluated in a student directed group activity so changes could be implemented. The final course evaluation consisted of the required university form and a request for written comments.

Course Description

Secondary Curriculum Development and Instructional Methods is one of the required professional education courses offered to students seeking certification to teach public secondary school in Texas. The course consists of 3 lecture hours per week and 22.5 hours of field observation in a public school. The field experience component is arranged through the Director of Field Experiences and is not under the direct supervision of the course instructor.

I had four semesters experience teaching the course prior to conducting the study. I first taught the course in the Fall, 1991. During that semester, I used a text selected by the previous instructor and based my syllabus on hers. The class was lecture and demonstration. Major assignments included three exams, one micro teaching, and a field experience journal and narrative summary. I also assigned a series of 15 point activities to allow students to apply principles and practices presented in class.

For Spring, 1992, I placed the small assignments on a sliding scale of 15 to 50 points to reflect expected student effort. Major assignments included one micro teaching, an oral presentation on a student selected course topic, and a final exam. I decreased the value of the field observation journal and narrative summary.

Teaching the course during Summer Session II, 1992 was a new experience due to longer class periods and a compressed time span. The short assignments were gathered into a skeletal unit. Major course assignments were the skeletal unit, one micro teaching, and a group presentation on a student selected course topic. Micro teachings were videotaped and students evaluated their own performance. The exam was eliminated.

In the Fall, 1992, I again utilized a series of small assignments to prepare students to use the activities in micro teachings and content area units. The content area unit was the culminating assignment of the semester and was intended to demonstrate everything the students had mastered. Course requirements also included one videotaped micro teaching, the field experience component, and a group presentation on one of the last five textbook chapters.

Many course modifications resulted from student requests. I struggled each successive semester to progress from lecture to a discussion/demonstration format. After four semesters, I was confident in my ability to facilitate student interaction with the

content. I planned to initiate more opportunities for collaborative work. I was prepared to negotiate curricular and evaluative decisions.

The Spring, 1993 class was composed of 14 women. The class divided almost evenly between traditional and nontraditional students. There was one African American and one Hispanic student. Areas of academic specialization included math, history, English, science, art, and special education. Diversity in age and background added richness to the class. As time passed, one student revealed herself to be my "Berlin Wall", a term used by Newman (1991) to designate those students who present special challenges. "Nearly every class has its Berlin Wall, it seems -- someone who has built solid defenses behind which to hide, or someone who insists on playing 'make me'" (Newman, 1991, p. 85).

Data Analysis

The reflective journal, Walking Journals, and final course evaluations were analyzed after the conclusion of the semester. Categories emerged and developed into two major themes: the search for an evolving student voice and the redefinition of teacher voice in a changing classroom. Instances of student voice included opportunities for students to collaborate with each other or the teacher in the decision making process. Exploring my unfolding teacher voice, I sought confirmation of movement toward a more collaborative classroom and identified areas of difficulty and disenchantment.

Looking for Student Voice

Providing a forum for student voice was one of my collaborative goals. Students became integral parts of the curriculum development and evaluation processes. Through Walking Journals, I maintained contact with student concerns. Planned lessons were reframed based on students' comments.

Curricular issues solved through collaboration included the implementation and use a supplemental text and the provision of class time to discuss the field experience component. The class chose to read the supplemental text throughout the semester and to discuss it in conjunction with the field experience component. These class decisions profoundly influenced the course calendar and the amount of time available to study other topics.

Students were offered options within assignments. They chose which professional journal to review and which professional conference or lecture to attend. Topics for the content area unit, the two micro teachings, and the instructional strategy-to-share were student selected. Assignment parameters were left flexible; only reluctantly were minimum lengths for written assignments announced.

Collaboration provided opportunities for students to engage in peer and self evaluation, especially during the micro teaching assignments. As each student presented her lesson, two other students evaluated the performance using forms identical to the instructor's. Each student also evaluated her own micro teaching

by viewing and appraising her videotape and writing a narrative analysis. For many students, this assignment marked their first experience teaching a lesson, viewing themselves on videotape, and evaluating themselves.

This evaluation experience prepared students to write their final self evaluation and to negotiate grades during the End of Term Conference. Students addressed three questions in their final self evaluation: What did you learn in the course? How much effort did you expend in preparation? What grade do you think you earned? Three notable conferences occurred that delineate the opportunities and dilemmas inherent in collaborative grade negotiation. Amanda's numerical average was an 88. After a brief discussion of the difficulty in detecting the difference between an A- and a B+, Amanda was presented with the task of determining her final grade. She agonized and wrestled with the decision and finally decided on a B+ which reflected her evaluation of her performance. Marsha, my "Berlin Wall", assigned herself an A on improvement and a B on performance and effort. We agreed on an A based on her numerical average and her improving performance. In my journal, I wrote,

> Then I took a deep breath and talked to her about her attitude. I told her that it could very well keep her from being a successful teacher. I expected a more aggressive stance. When I talked to her about her attitude towards all the administrative and interpersonal 'stuff' of teaching, I

was not telling her anything new!

Mary presented a third distinct situation. On her evaluation, she noted, "When you first told us that there were no exams, I was wondering how you were going to grade us. I also thought that I would not know if I had learned anything." In her conclusion, Mary gave herself an A. At that precise moment, her grades numerically averaged a C. I asked her to complete two outstanding assignments and to return for a second conference. When Mary returned, she had received full possible credit on the two late assignments, and her grades averaged a middling B. Mary insisted she had earned an A based on effort and knowledge gained. Though I still question the grade's validity, I assigned her an A- because of the importance of trust in a collaborative classroom.

Looking for Teacher Voice

As students became actively involved in curricular decisions and the evaluation process, I began to ask, "Where is my voice? What is happening to me as the collaborative process develops?" Data analysis revealed three recurrent issues: ambiguity, power struggles, and the lure of traditional behaviors.

Teaching abounds with ambiguous decisions. Newman (1991) refers to this ambiguity as the "mess of teaching" (p. 124). She asserts that a teacher can be right and wrong at the same time. The comments provided to assist one student with a problem may foster dependency in another. I frequently record difficulty gauging my new role. On February 1, I wrote, "In the past, my

main goal was to 'cover the content'. Now that my main goal has become a more personalized form of learning, I'm having difficulty judging the effectiveness of what I am doing." Again on February 15,

> In attempting to not be too structured, I fear I have swung like a pendulum too far to the other side. It sure seemed easier when I saw myself as the repository of knowledge and I just made deposits to the students in the form of lectures and assignments.

The question of when to intervene, when to offer assistance, when to provide more structure was always in my mind.

In traditional classrooms, authority resides with the teacher; however, in collaborative classrooms, students with newly delegated decision making capabilities should feel empowered also. True collaborative sharing of power can be uncomfortable for both teacher and students. Power issues revealed themselves in my relationship with Marsha. Prior to reading Newman (1991), I would have hesitated to name the negative feelings this student generated, considering it unprofessional. I found, however, that naming these feelings empowered me to deal honestly with them. Marsha's concern with the classroom tenor revealed itself in her desire for precise assignment parameters and in her Walking Journal when she wrote that she felt she missed something everyday. In my reflective journal, I responded,

> This course requires the student to provide a lot of the

structure and to make decisions about what is important. That can be very disconcerting. My first response to someone like Marsha is defensive. Instead of seeing myself as the most important part of the learning equation, I need to be putting the focus back on the learner. Marsha is simply telling me that she has a problem; my concern now should be how to help her solve her problem and not to turn her problem into my problem.

Old habits die hard when new practices are implemented in the classroom. I intermittently lapsed into previously comfortable methods of presentation when I was unprepared to facilitate a discussion. I discovered, however, that former comfort did not insure present comfort. From my journal,

> Since I was not adequately prepared, I fell back into lecture. Only I discovered that it was no longer comfortable. I was acutely conscious of the lack of responsiveness from the class. I find myself in an interesting position; I can't go back to the way I taught a year ago. Now I can only go forward.

The Confluence of Two Voices

Student and teacher voices do not operate separately but rather interdependently. Their confluence is displayed in the midterm course evaluation process. The ambiguity experienced by students manifested itself in their list of course weaknesses which included: 1) unclear performance expectations, 2) greater

discussion of major assignments, and 3) incorporation of all opinions and concentration on positive aspects and/or experiences. In my journal, I recorded my feelings,

> I found it very difficult not to get defensive. I think that I am doing most of the things indicated in the weaknesses, but the important point is that the students don't perceive that I am. Instead of getting my back up and getting angry, I need to work on viewing these from the students' perspective.

Power issues and the lure of old habits are revealed in my overt response to the students. Two days after the evaluation, I presented a straightforward lecture and highly structured assignment. I commented in my journal, "I wonder if I was offended by their comments about the need for performance expectations and decided to show them how dull having everything spelled out for them could be."

Conclusions

This study enabled me to turn a different lens upon myself, to magnify and scrutinize my evolving beliefs about learning, how those beliefs are accomplished in a classroom setting, and how I fail to bring those beliefs to fruition. The greatest difficulty was living with a heightened sense of uncertainty, ambiguity, and vulnerability. My performance as a teacher was under constant self scrutiny. I experienced a sense of being inside and outside of myself at the same time. On the inside, I was contemplating

options, making plans, presenting information, and gauging student reaction. On the outside, I was evaluating my visible, external performance and the invisible, internal decision making process. A consciousness of every move and every word permeated all my classroom activity.

I learned a great deal about myself as a classroom innovator, instructor, and learner. My teaching philosophy and practice has clearly changed over the five semesters examined in this study. The class described is evolving slowly and laboriously from a traditional, transmission mode of presentation into a collaborative learning community. Collaborative practices are being implemented. Students have opportunities to participate in curricular decisions and the evaluation process. However, both students and teacher occasionally slip into old patterns of passivity and dominance. I experienced the frequent disappointment of a philosophy not perfectly articulated in practice.

The teacher's role is pivotal in the classroom. My desire to establish a collaborative classroom was the engine driving the innovation. Underlying the ambiguity, power struggles, and relapses into traditional patterns is the need to delicately balance control and freedom. As the instructor grants students more control over the curriculum and evaluation processes, s/he must also provide a scaffold that supports them as they learn the new collaborative lessons.

In this backward glance, I perceive a class caught up in the excitement and vulnerability of change. Students are moving into new decision making roles. The instructor no longer comfortable with old ways cautiously and hesitantly explores new modes of teaching and learning, utilizing reflection to investigate what occurs in the classroom. Perhaps Smith (1988) is correct when he concludes, "It is more important to think collaboratively than to try to produce 'collaborative behaviors'" (p. 70).

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